

The Need to Validate Planning Assumptions

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JOINT PUBLICATION 1-02, *The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, defines an assumption as “a supposition on the current situation or a presupposition on the future course of events, either or both assumed to be true in the absence of positive proof, necessary to enable the commander in the process of planning to complete an estimate of the situation and make a decision on the course of action.”¹ But, this definition of planning assumptions is incomplete. A key word—validation—is missing.

We need to rewrite the current joint definition and the planning doctrine on assumptions to stress the importance of continually validating assumptions. In addition, current doctrine needs to stress the importance of how to validate assumptions, and the joint community should address the following issues concerning planning assumptions.

First, planners must address assumptions concerning U.S. access to a foreign country. Diplomatic considerations are crucially important given the expeditionary focus of the U.S. Armed Forces and the need for access to basing or overflight.

Second, no formal mechanisms are in place early in the planning process for validating planning assumptions. We recommend using a validation matrix that provides a forcing function to visually focus planners’ intellectual energy to establishing assumptions and revisiting them.

Third, planners should establish validation points for every assumption to test the assumption’s validity. We define a validation point as an event that directly affects an assumption the commander must validate or invalidate. Changes in such events require a revalidation of the assumption, branch plan, or change in the plan.

Assumptions are Vulnerable

Assumptions are more vulnerable to events from the time the deliberate planning process begins to crisis action planning (CAP). The current treatment of planning assumptions, or the overreliance on assumptions, has turned the planning process into assumptive planning.

Operation Iraqi Freedom demonstrates the urgent need to amend the current planning process to address validating assumptions. According to the *Naval Institute Proceedings* article, “You Can’t Assume ‘Nothin’,” only 4 of 12 assumptions made before Operation Iraqi Freedom remained rock solid.² Operation Iraqi Freedom demonstrates the need to validate assumptions early and continuously; establish a validation matrix with validation points; and vigorously validate assumptions based on access. Assumptions based on access and U.S. diplomatic success carry more of a burden to validate than all other assumptions. According to the U.S. *National Security Strategy of the United States*, “[M]ilitary capabilities must ensure U.S. access to distant theaters.”³

The Armed Forces’ expeditionary focus puts a premium on access agreements to facilitate deployments, military operations, logistical support, and redeployment. When referring to the future asymmetric threat, U.S. “access to theaters is going to be increasingly difficult to come by.”⁴ Joint planners must identify access assumptions and, as events dictate, revisit them continually in the planning process. Planners can become committed to assumptions and never revisit them. To avoid this pitfall, planners must continually validate planning assumptions even after initial assumption development and into CAP.

To develop successful operation plans, military planners rely heavily on political planning assumptions, especially assumptions tied to access, by understanding the uncertain nature of the assumptions and the need to revalidate them. Most joint planners tend to develop apolitical assumptions. The difficulty arises when planning assumptions at the operational level are so dependent on strategic and diplomatic assurances. Without a change in the way we validate assumptions, fallacies in operational planning and inefficiencies in CAP and operations orders will continually plague us.

Successful planning requires continual validation of planning assumptions. Developing a validation matrix and using validation points helps planners justify the continued use of an assumption early in the planning process and throughout CAP. This matrix forces planners to focus their efforts to continuously validate or revisit assumptions.

Military planners seldom revisit planning assumptions after initial planning development. Current doctrine and guidance at the Joint Forces Staff College state: "Assumptions given by the higher headquarters must be treated as facts by the subordinate commanders."⁵ Because of this definition, planners must further validate assumptions because "a poor assumption may partially or completely invalidate the entire plan."⁶ The director of strategic studies at the Strategic Studies Institute notes: "Correcting faulty assumptions may require reworking the fundamental concept entirely."⁷ If the plan is not reworked in its entirety, at a minimum, planners must develop a branch plan. Using validation points for assumptions forces planners to verify assumptions and possibly initiate branch planning. An invalid assumption can cause a requirement for a branch plan. Therefore, "continuous and relentless validation of assumptions throughout the deliberate planning process and at the start of CAP is a must."⁸

A gray zone exists between the start of the detailed deployment plan and the beginning of crisis action planning in which assumptions made during the deliberate planning process are carried over into crisis action planning without being validated. Joint



Equipment being unloaded at Iskenderum, Turkey, for a pre-Iraqi Freedom exercise, 1998.

USMC

Publication 5-0, *Doctrine for Planning Joint Operations*, states: "The detailed analysis and coordination accomplished in the time available for deliberate planning can expedite effective decisionmaking and execution during a crisis. As the crisis unfolds, assumptions and projections are replaced with facts and actual conditions."⁹

Assumptions in the gray zone pose the most risk to the plan: "U.S. defense planners explicitly identify assumptions made in the development of war plans. While the process for explicitly identifying planning assumptions is neither scientific nor foolproof, it is extremely valuable because it makes war planners and decisionmakers more cognizant of at least some of the plan's inherent risks."¹⁰ To mitigate risks, planners can identify some areas as generic validation points.

When identifying points that might validate an assumption, planners must carefully consider events that might influence an assumption. National and world events have tremendous influence on an assumption's validity. The deliberate planning process "relies heavily on assumptions regarding the political and military circumstances that will exist when the plan is implemented."¹¹ At the operational level, many planners use political assumptions. Military planners should not shy away from political assumptions; they should be more aggressive in validating them.

Political and diplomatic affairs are usually tied to basing assumptions. To further develop validation points for these assumptions, interagency personnel should advise military planners on world and economic events that might influence assumptions. Not only will this broaden the planners' view, it



Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz meets with a Turkish delegation at the Pentagon, November 2003.

DOD

will also ensure viable validation points are set for every assumption.

In accordance with the *National Security Strategy*, U.S. reliance on foreign basing is contingent on assurances from foreign governments. That said, it is not prudent to assume a sovereign country will allow U.S. forces to stage and base an attack from its soil unless its national interests are at stake.

Turkey and the Northern Front

The recent experience with Turkey leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom indicates assumptions concerning longtime allies might not always hold true. The plan called for the use of a northern front in Turkey for air refueling operations, special operations forces, a logistical base, and 4th Infantry Division (ID) and joint personnel recovery operations.

Three dozen ships loaded with tanks and heavy equipment for the Army's 4th ID waited off the coast of Turkey for permission to offload.¹² The equipment and the 60,000 soldiers represented a significant portion of our combat capability that did not participate in the start of combat operations in Iraq. Many events in Turkey (changing political situations, diminishing public support, economic woes, and a newly elected government) should have been validation points even though U.S. Army Central Command was well into crisis action planning.

In July 2002, Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman met in Ankara with Turkish Government officials seeking permission to base an attack from Turkey.¹³ Unfortunately, internal Turkish political events resulted in mass resignations

of Turkish deputies. Wolfowitz returned with the message that the "Turks will not let us down" even though a vote of no confidence had passed and new elections were to be held in November 2002.¹⁴ The vote of no confidence in July should have been a clear indication that events had changed the status of one validation point (a supportive Turkish Government).

The new vote took place on 3 November 2002. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) defeated Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit's party and installed a new anti-

establishment government with roots in political Islam.¹⁵ The election of a new, untested government should have been a validation point for CAP planners. Turkey's once powerful military and political elite would now have less of a voice in political and strategic decisions—a development for which U.S. decisionmakers were unprepared. The installation of the new government was an important change that could have invalidated the planning assumption.

Based on the state of affairs in Turkey, the Turkish Government had every reason to express its concern for a war with Iraq. Any of the following events should have triggered a status change of a validation point, possibly invalidating the assumption:

First, 96 percent of the Turkish people did not support a U.S.-led war with Iraq.¹⁶

Second, the 1991 Persian Gulf War emboldened Kurdish separatists who began using northern Iraq to attack Turkey. By the time a 1999 cease-fire ended the fighting, 30,000 people had died, perhaps as many as half of them Turkish soldiers.¹⁷ In 2003, the Turkish people did not want a repeat of the bloodshed of the 1990s.

Third, the United States failed to deliver on most of its promises of economic aid in return for Turkey's support of the Persian Gulf War. Because Turkey was Iraq's largest trading partner, the Persian Gulf War had weakened Turkey's economy, which caused Turkey's currency to collapse in 2000.¹⁸

Fourth, in February 2003, Turkey refused the final U.S. economic aid package of \$26 billion. Turkey sought twice that sum and let it be known that without it there would be no new vote in parliament to allow U.S. troops into Turkey.¹⁹ In

the end, a new vote was never taken, and the ships carrying the 4th ID turned south on 17 March 2003, 2 days before the decapitation attack on Saddam Hussein.

The initial course of events should have been an indication that Turkish cooperation was not assured: "In deliberate plans, there is a rule that no assumption about allies' cooperation should be made unless the commitment is clear [in the form of agreements or alliances in place, for example]."²⁰ The events should have been enough to cast doubt on whether Turkey would support a northern front.

In retrospect, it is clear the United States quickly reached several validation points that invalidated a basing assumption. Indeed, the political dialogue leading to the March 2003 vote to allow troops to base in Turkey seemed to put the assumption in jeopardy as early as July 2002, when Wolfowitz seemed convinced of Turkish support even though a vote of no confidence was pending.

In December 2002, Wolfowitz flew to Ankara for talks with the new Turkish leaders; he emerged saying, "Turkish support is assured."²¹ Whether Washington received positive signals from the Turkish leaders or U.S. leaders refused to believe the Turks would put their own national interests ahead of U.S. desires is unclear. Leading up to the March vote in the Turkish Parliament, the events and validation points seemed clear.

On 1 March 2003, the Turkish parliament voted not to approve U.S. troops in Turkey. Still, the ships of the 4th ID stayed off Turkey's coast for an additional 16 days after the vote. U.S. officials did not alter initial assumptions, although new dynamics required reevaluation by civilian and military planners and leaders.²²

Turkey had loyally backed U.S. military actions since the Korean War.²³ What was different now? Why did the 1 March 2003 vote in parliament authorizing 60,000 U.S. troops to use Turkey as a northern front fail?

Recommendations

Access to other countries will continue to prove critical to U.S. war plans. Emplacing the following recommendations will allow planners to continually validate planning assumptions:

First, the joint community must recast the current definition of assumptions to stress the importance of continually validating assumptions. U.S. Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni said: "I would always challenge assumptions very vigorously as the [commander in chief] CINC. We have too many [as-

sumptions]. Many are pointless and some assume away problems."²⁴

Second, planners must validate assumptions as early as possible by using a validation matrix and establishing validation points.

Third, combatant commanders must incorporate the Joint Interagency Coordination Group (JIACG) and the Coalition Interagency Coordination Group (CIACG) into the planning process. Active participation by military and interagency planners must take place in developing assumptions and the validation process.

Our proposed definition of assumption is: "A supposition of current or future events that is continually validated during the planning process to enable the commander to complete an estimate of the situation and make a decision on the course of action." This definition, used with validation points and the validation-point matrix, would provide direction to planners throughout the planning process.

Before explaining where to insert the validation-point matrix into the planning process, it is necessary to review the five phases of the deliberate planning process: initiation, concept development, plan development, plan review, and supporting plans. The second phase, concept development, is where we can insert validation points. Concept development consists of six steps: mission analysis, planning guidance development, staff estimates, commander's estimate, CINC's strategic concept, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff review.²⁵

Planners identify valid assumptions during the planning guidance development step of the concept development phase (step 2 of phase 2). Initial staff briefings must include a validation matrix and validation points in the concept development phase. Possible

Validating Assumptions:

Turkey Will Allow U.S. Forces Basing Rights

Jan 2002	Feb 2003	Validation Points
S	N	1. Vote of no confidence (July '02)
S	N	2. Turkish government change (Nov. '02)
Q	Q	3. Fear of Kurdish state
Q	Q	4. Potential economic effect of war
Q	Q	5. Turkish public support
S	N	6. Economic support from U.S. (Turkey eventually refused U.S. economic aid package.)

N – No Support Q – Questionable Support S – Support

validation points for the matrix should include events such as national and international political events, public opinion, and economic conditions.

The validation point matrix includes events specific to Turkey leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom. (See figure.) The letter codes applied to the validation points in the matrix provide planners a tool to assess the validity of current assumptions. If employed properly, the validation point matrix can be a visual tool to help military and interagency planners throughout the entire planning process.

Interagency coordination is conducted through groups such as the JIACG and CIACG. According to Joint Forces Command, the JIACG "seeks to establish operational connections between civilian and military departments and agencies that will improve planning and coordination with the government. Functions of the JIACG include participating in combatant command staff crisis planning and assessment; civilian agency campaign planning; and presenting unique civilian agency approaches, capabilities, and limitations to the military campaign planners."²⁶

The JIACG's value is in identifying validation points during the planning process and reporting the status of validation points. The CIACG "establishes operational connections between civilian and military

departments and agencies that will improve planning and coordination within the coalition."²⁷ Coalition partners have tremendous insight into validation points within their country that could change the status of an assumption. Also, validation points might become less ambiguous in developing assumptions with expertise from coalition partners.

Developing good assumptions at the beginning of the planning process is crucial, but more important is the continuous validation of assumptions. We have redefined the definition of assumptions, established validation points, introduced the validation point matrix, and included the JIACG and CIACG in the combatant commander's staff. Our definition of an assumption directs planners to continually validate assumptions throughout the planning process. Applying the validation point matrix to the assumption of using Turkey as a northern front demonstrates the matrix's usefulness. Including the JIACG and CIACG on the combatant commander's staff would help planners establish validation points and use the validation point matrix.

If planners had used the tools we have outlined, they might have invalidated the use of Turkey as a northern front. Planners must be cognizant of changing events throughout the planning process so as to continuously validate assumptions. **MR**

NOTES

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